



Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

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March 20, 2019

Senator Steve Cassano, Co-Chair
Representative Cristin McCarthy Vahey, Co-Chair
Planning and Development Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 2100
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

RE: HB7192 An Act Concerning Municipal and Regional Opportunities and Efficiencies

Dear Honorable Co-Chairs Cassano and McCarthy Vahey and Committee Members:

The Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments (RiverCOG) has concerns with HB7192 as proposed. The seventeen municipalities of the Lower Connecticut River Valley participate in numerous shared and regional services including schools, health districts, PSAPs, paramedic services, shared staff, and transfer stations. These shared arrangements came about in all instances through cooperation between the municipalities, region, and state. RiverCOG urges that this model be followed, instead of top down solutions which treat all municipalities the same.

Nevertheless, the proposal to shift assessment and property revaluation work to the COGs is interesting, not because of the specifics of the proposal, but because it could be recast as an opportunity to modernize and streamline town halls. Instead of back-office support, with the COGs employing typists, we see a role for the COGs to facilitate the reimagining of municipal government with the implementation of digital workflows that improve efficiency, transparency, usefulness, and data collection. However the first step of this initiative has to be the identification of approaches that will and won't save money, and improve upon existing processes in our municipalities.

Good planning will allow us to take advantage of the opportunities presented by an aging municipal workforce, who will be retiring. Significant cost savings could be found in attrition, but collective bargaining issues may still be an impediment if work is reduced through automation. It is important that the state ensure that municipal employees are treated fairly, while at the same time provide a pathway for municipalities to be able to implement technology and efficiencies.

Determining how municipal tax assessment and property revaluation functions can be improved will take time to figure out. This bill should not predetermine the best approach for improving tax assessment and regional property revaluation, but instead should set a statewide framework within which municipalities and regions have the flexibility to craft solutions and timelines that work. An example of such a collaboration around regional revaluation already exists in Northeastern Connecticut COG, which would be undone by a proscriptive bill.

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In order to have staff to support regional services work, such as assessment back office support and regional property revaluation, RiverCOG needs to receive sufficient and reliable Regional Services Grant (RSG) funding. The RSG formula set in HB 192 (lines 314 & 315) would provide less than half the FY2019 funding level. This would be the lowest RSG/SGIA funding level ever received by RiverCOG and would require the elimination of positions. Although the bill provides for the Secretary of OPM to provide additional funds to COGs, the potential unpredictability of this arrangement could make it difficult for RiverCOG to keep professional staff capable of furthering regional services year to year.

In response to RSG volatility, RiverCOG has diversified by raising municipal dues to the highest per capita level in the state, seeking new grants via a new 501c3 non-profit, and providing services to our member municipalities for a fee. However we are funded, RiverCOG will remain a valuable resource for our member municipalities, but, in the end, our work program is dictated by our funding. When RiverCOG staff is out in the field providing zoning enforcement services, they will not be available to work on overseeing a regional revaluation project or fulfilling unfunded state mandates on COGs.

Another component of this bill that is of particular interest to RiverCOG is the future role of the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR). I have served on ACIR for more than two years, and over that time little has been accomplished because of a lack of staffing and funding. I support funding ACIR so it can accomplish its mission to advise and facilitate intergovernmental relations and provide well thought out and researched advice to the Administration, General Assembly, COGs, and municipalities. ACIR should also be used as a vehicle for determining good policies for regional services and efficiencies at all levels of government. I would encourage that ACIR be required to submit a budget and work program to OPM for approval, similar to the COGs or other recipients of funds from the Regional Performance Incentive Program tax diversion. In regard to ACIR composition, I would recommend that the COG boards be given one appointment from their planning region. This would ensure representation from all nine regions and all 169 municipalities in Connecticut. Also ACIR should be charged with improving our relationship with the federal government, particularly in increasing the amount of federal discretionary funding sent to Connecticut. Finally as chair of the Connecticut Association of Councils of Governments (CTCOG), I would request that line 133 "Regional Planning Association of Connecticut" be updated to CTCOG's current name adopted in 2015.

Please do not hesitate to contact me about RiverCOG's comments on this bill.

Sincerely,



Samuel S. Gold, AICP
Executive Director